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Moments and Journeys

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MOMENTS AND JOURNEYS

I remember, too, while we were walking one day on the Monchsberg—a smaller hill on the opposite side of the river—looking down on a green plain that stretched away to the foothills, and watching in the distance people moving along tiny roads. Why do such things seem enormously important to us? Why, when seen from a distance, do the casual journeys of men and women, perhaps going on some trivial errand, take on the character of a pilgrimage? I can only explain it by some deep archetypal image in our minds, of which we become conscious only at rare moments when we realize that our own life is a journey.¹

This passage from Edwin Muir's *Autobiography* seems like a good place to begin, not only for its essential truth, but because it awakens in me a whole train of images—images of the journey as I have come to understand it, moments and stages in existence. Many of these go back to the years I lived on my homestead in Alaska. That life itself, part of the soil and weather of the place, seemed to have about it much of the time an aura of deep and lasting significance. I wasn't always aware of this, of course. There were many things to be struggled with from day to day, tasks of one sort or another, things that had to be built, crops to be looked after, meat to kill and wood to cut—all of which took a kind of passionate attention. But often when I was able to pause and look up from what I was doing, I caught brief glimpses of a life much older than mine.

Some of these images stand out with great force from the continual coming and going of which they were part. Fred Campbell, the old hunter and miner I had come to know, that lean brown man of patches and strange fits. He and I and my wife, Peg, with seven dogs, five of them carrying packs: we all went over Buckeye Dome one day in the late summer of 1954. A clear hot day in mid-August, the whole troop of us strung out on the trail. Campbell and his best dog, a yellow bitch named Granny, were in the lead. We were in a hurry, or seemed to be, the dogs pulling us on, straining at their leashes for the first two or three miles, and then, turned loose, just panting along, anxious not to be left behind. We stopped only briefly that morning, to adjust a dogpack and to catch our wind. Out of the close timber with its hot shadows and swarms of mosquitoes, we came into the open sunlight of the Dome. The grass and low shrubs on the treeless

slopes moved gently in the warm air that came from somewhere south, out of the Gulf.

At mid-day we halted near the top of the Dome, to look for water among the rocks, and pick blueberries. The dogs, with their packs removed, lay down in the heat, snapping at flies. Buckeye Dome was the high place nearest to home, though it was nearly seven miles by trail from Richardson. It wasn't very high, either, only 3,000 feet, but it rose clear of the surrounding hills. From its summit you could see in any direction, as far as Fairbanks, if the air was clear enough. We saw landmarks in the distances, pointed out to us and named by Campbell: Banner Dome, Bull Dome, Cockscomb, and others I've forgotten. In the southeast, a dust cloud coming off the Delta River. Campbell talked to us of his camps and trails, of years made of such journeys as ours, a whole history told around the figure of one man. Peg and I were new to the north and eager to learn all we could. We listened, sucking blueberries from a tin cup.

And then we were on the move again. I can see Campbell in faded jeans and red felt hat, bending over one of the dogs as he tightened a strap, swearing and saying something about the weather, the distance, and his getting too old to make such a trip. We went off down the steep north slope of the Dome in a great rush, through miles of windfalls, following that twisting, rootgrown trail of his. Late in the evening, wading the shallows of a creek, we came tired and bitten to his small cabin on the shore of a lake he had named for himself.

This range of images closes with another of a later time. By then I had my own team, and Jo and I with four dogs were bound uphill one afternoon in the cool September sunlight to pick cranberries on the long ridge overlooking Redmond Creek. The tall yellow grass on the partly cleared ridge bent over in the wind that came easily from the west. I walked behind, and I could see, partly hidden by the grass, the figures of the others as they rounded the shoulder of a little hill and stopped to look back toward me. The single human figure there in the sunlight, under moving clouds, the dogs with their fur slightly ruffled, seemed the embodiment of an old story.

And somewhere in the great expanse of time that made life in the wilderness so open and unending, other seasons were stations on the journey. Coming across the Tanana River on the midwinter ice, we had three dogs in harness and one young female running loose beside us. We had been three days visiting a neighbor, a trapper living on the far side of the river, and were returning home. Halfway across the

river we stopped to rest; the sled was heavy, the dogs were tired and lay down on the ice.

Standing there, leaning on the back of the sled, I knew a vague sense of remoteness and peril. The river ice always seemed a little dangerous, even when it was thick and solid. There were open stretches of clear blue water, and sometimes large deep cracks where the river could be heard running deep and steady. We were heading downriver into a cloudy December evening. Wind came across the ice, pushing a little dry snow, and no other sound. Only the vast presence of snow and ice, scattered islands, and the dark slope of Richardson Hill in the distance before us.

To live by a large river is to be kept in the heart of things. We are involved in its life, the heavy sound of it in the summer, wearing away silt and loose gravel from the cutbanks, and pushing this into sandbars that will be islands in another far-off year. Trees are forever tilting over the water and falling and drifting away, to lodge in a driftpile somewhere downriver. The grey water drags at the roots of willows, spruce and cottonwood; sometimes it brings up the trunk of a tree buried a thousand years before, or farther back than that, in the age of ice. The log comes loose from the fine sand, heavy and dripping, still bearing the tunnel marks made by the insects of that time. The salmon come in midsummer, and then whitefish, and salmon again in the fall, and are caught in my nets and are carried away, to be smoked and eaten, or dried for winter feed. As the summer wears away into the fall, the sound of the river changes, the water slowly clears and falls, and we begin to hear the swish of pan ice against the shore. One morning in early winter a great silence comes: the river is frozen.

We stood alone there on the ice that day, two people, four dogs and a loaded sled and nothing before us but land and water into Asia. It was time to move on again. I spoke to the dogs and gave the sled a push.

Other days. On a hard packed trail home from Cabin Creek I halted the dogs part way up a long hill in scattered spruce. It was a clear evening, not far below zero. Ahead of us, over an open ridge, a full moon stood clear of the land, enormous and yellow in the deep blue of the arctic evening. Billy Melvin, an old miner, had once described to me a moonrise he had seen, a moon coming up ahead of him on the trail, "big as a rainbarrel." And it was like that, like an enormous and rusty rainbarrel into which you could go on looking,

and the far end of the barrel was open. I stood there, thinking it was possible to go on forever into that snow and yellow light, with no sound but my own breathing, the padding of the dogs' feet, and the occasional squeak of a sled runner. The moon whitened and grew smaller; twilight deepened, and we went on to the top of the hill.

What does it take to make a journey? A place to start from, something to leave behind. A road, a trail, or a river. Companions, and something like a destination: a camp, a house, an inn or another shore. We can imagine a journey with no destination, just the act of going, never to arrive anywhere. But I think we would always hope to find *something, someone*, however unexpected, unprepared for. Seen from a distance or taken part in, all journeys may be the same, and we arrive exactly where we are.

One late summer afternoon, near the road to McKinley Park, I watched the figures of three people slowly climb the slope of a mountain in the northeast. The upper part of the mountain was bare of trees, and the small alpine plants there were already red and gold from the early frost. Sunlight came through broken rainclouds and lit up the slope and the three figures. They were so far away I could not tell if they were men or women, but the red jacket worn by one of them stood out brightly in the sun. They climbed higher and higher, bound for a ridge where some large rocks broke through the thin soil. A shadow kept pace with them, slowly darkening the slope below them, as the sun sank behind another mountain in the southwest. I wondered where they were going. Perhaps to hunt mountain sheep, or to make ready a winter camp; or they were just climbing to a berry patch they knew of. It was late in the day, they would not get back by dark. I watched them as if they were the figures in a dream, and bore with them the destiny of the race. They stopped to rest for a while near the skyline, and then were gone over the ridge. The sunlight stayed briefly on the high rock summit, and then a raincloud moved in and hid the mountaintop.

When life is simplified its essence becomes clearer, and we can know our lives as part of some ancient human activity in a time not measured by clocks and calendars, but by the turning of a great wheel, the positions of which are not wage-hours, nor days and weeks, but immense stations called Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. I suppose it will seem too obvious to say that this sense of things will be far less apparent to people closed off in the routine of a

modern city. I think people must now and then be aware of such images and moments as I have been telling of, but do not remember them, or attach no special significance to them. They are images that pass quickly out of sight because there is no place for them in our lives. And this says something about what happens to us when our lives become crowded and harried: there is no time allowed us in which to see and feel acutely any existence but the one handed us by society. We are swept along by events we cannot link together in a significant pattern, like a flood of refugees pushed on by the news of a remote disaster. It is the business of modern states and societies to do exactly this to people, as Ortega y Gasset once said, to keep them distracted and beside themselves, so that they cannot take a stand within themselves. A rush of conflicting impressions, such as occurs to nearly everyone these days, keeps away stillness, and it is in stillness that the images arise, as they will, fluently and naturally, when there is nothing to prevent them. And yet, out of the packed confusion of ordinary daily life, sometimes the right moment reveals itself:

One late afternoon, just before sunset, Blair was working at her loom, while I and two or three others in the family sat in the room and watched her. The sunlight came down through the window and shone, partly on her and on the floor, barred by the slats of a venetian blind. It lighted part of the wall behind me, and the face of her mother sitting next to me. There was even a little sunlight in my wine glass. The whole room was steeped in a warmth, a redness or ruddiness about to settle into dusk. And for a moment or two there was a complete silence, except for the sound of her weaving. It was one of those moments in which it is possible to feel that something deep and essential in existence, eternal and unchanging, is somehow contained, illuminated, held briefly; an insight not to be explained or deciphered, a moment of pure being.²

There is the dream journey and the actual life. The two seem to touch now and then, and when men lived less complicated and distracted lives perhaps the two were never apart at all, but continually one thing. I have read somewhere that this was true of the Mohave Indians who once lived along the Colorado River. They could dream at will and moved without effort from waking into dreaming life. Life and dream were bound together. And within this must be a kind of radiance, a very old and deep assurance that life has continuity and meaning, that things are somehow in place. It is the journey resolved into one endless present.

And the stuff of this is all around us. I retain strong images from

treks with my step-children: of a night four years ago when we camped on a mountaintop, a night lighted by snow patches and windy sparks from a fire going out. Sleeping on the frozen ground, we heard the sound of an owl from the cold, bare oak trees above us. Or a summer evening near Painted Rock in central California, with a small class of school-children. We had come to learn about Indians. The voices of the children carried over the burned fields under the red glare of that sky, and the rock gave back heat in the dusk like an immense oven. Of ships and trains that pull away, planes that fly into the night; or just the figure of one man crossing an otherwise empty lot. If such moments seem not as easily come by, as clear and as resonant as they were once in the wilderness, it may be because they are not so clearly linked to the life that surrounds them and of which they are part. But they are present, nonetheless, available to imagination, and of the same character.

Last December, on vacation in California, I went with my daughter and a friend to a place called Pool Rock. We drove for a long time over a mountain, through meadows touched by the first green of the winter rains, and saw few fences or other signs of people. Leaving our car in a small campground at the end of the road, we hiked four miles up a series of canyons and narrow gorges. We lost our way several times, but always found it again. A large covey of quail went up from the chaparral on a slope above us; deer and bobcat tracks showed now and then in the sand under our feet. An extraordinary number of coyote droppings scattered along the trail attracted our attention. I poked one of them with a stick, saw it contained much rabbit fur and bits of bone. We talked of *Bigfoot*, or *Littlefoot*, as we decided it had to be. There were patches of ice in the streambed and a few leaves still yellow on the sycamores.

We came to the rock in mid-afternoon, a great sandstone pile rising out of the foothills like a sanctuary, or a shrine to which one comes yearly on a pilgrimage. There are places that take on symbolic value to an individual or a tribe, "soul-resting places" a friend of mine has called them. Pool Rock has become that to me, symbol of that hidden, original life we have done so much to destroy. We spent an hour or two exploring the rock, a wind and rain-scoured honeycomb stained yellow and rose by the mineral in the sand. In a small cave near the base of the rock, strange figures of reptiles, insects and birdmen are painted on the smoke-blackened walls and ceiling. They, and the bearpaw impressions gouged into the rock, and a few rock mortars, are all that is left of a once flourishing people.

We climbed to the summit of the rock, using the worn hand and footholds made long ago by the Chumash. We drank water there from the pool that gives the rock its name, and ate our lunch, sitting in the cool sunlight. And then the wind came up, a storm moving in from the coast, whipping our lunchbag over the edge of the rock. We left the rock by the way we had come and hiked down the gorge in the windy, leaf-blown twilight. In the dark, just before the rain, we came to the campground, laughing, speaking of the things we had seen, and strangely happy.

1. Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography*, Seabury Paperback Edition, 1968, p. 217.
2. John Haines, "One Seamless, Deepening Cloth," with Arthur Oberg, *Crazy Horse* 15, 1974, p. 11.